

# **Encounters with state power: Methodological and ethical reflections**

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In her classic essay “Up the Anthropologist”, Laura Nader (1972) argues convincingly that we need to study up as well as down if we want to investigate structures of power. According to her, it does not suffice to give a voice to those who are normally not heard and sound anthropological theory does not arise from an understanding ‘from below’ alone. “What if,” Nader writes, “in reinventing anthropology, anthropologists were to study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerlessness, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty?” (Nader 1972, 288). In this essay, I reflect on my research amongst uniformed civil servants. What does it mean to become involved in the (work) lives of those who exercise power?

In 2015, I conducted seven months of ethnographic fieldwork on non-sovereignty and the manifestation of the state on Saba and St. Eustatius, two Caribbean islands that maintain a governmental link with the Netherlands. On the symbolic date of 10-10-10, these islands were integrated into the government system of the Netherlands as an *openbaar lichaam* or a ‘public entity,’ an administrative unit that is sometimes described as a special municipality. Before, these small communities were part of the semi-autonomous Netherlands Antilles. In relation to this radical governmental reorganisation, I was interested in the ways in which citizens and civil servants in these postcolonial societies relate to state power. One of the questions I explored was how state power acquires legitimacy through those who are designated to exercise state power. To do so, I investigated bureaucratic practices in the islands’ harbours. These practices are mostly aimed at monitoring and managing on and off island movements of people and the goods that sometimes come along with them.

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Doing ethnographic research on these topics in a border zone meant that most of my research participants were men. Most of them wore uniforms, some of them had guns. All of the uniformed civil servants, both men and women, had some control over my body and my movements. Immersion in this peculiar field site presented me with methodological and ethical challenges for which I was ill-prepared. I felt like I was on a terrain where "methodological truisms fail as guides to action" (Goslinga and Frank 2007, xi). In this essay, I explore some of the questions that I struggled with during fieldwork. This exploration departs from an ethnographic vignette that describes my banishment from the harbour premises by a police officer. Rather than provide answers, I raise questions in an ongoing and personal effort to grapple with the practice of studying up, down, and sideways (Nader 1972, 291).

### **An awkward encounter**

Darkness is slowly enveloping Saba's harbour on this regular evening, during a regular arrival of the local ferry. I have been conducting daily participant observation at the harbour for three months. Life at the border has become familiar and predictable. I have developed a solid understanding of all the flags, passports, uniforms, bureaucratic procedures, and the formal and informal rules of governance that make up this tiny arena of transatlantic statehood. At least, I think I have. Like always, I help offloading boxes from the ferry and observe the routines of border control. When two police officers appear at the harbour, I approach them and start a conversation about their presence at the harbour, which is out of the ordinary.

After I have explained the purpose of my research, one officer in particular volunteers information about his tasks and activities. After a brief conversation, he invites me inside the Immigration and Customs Office and stresses the importance of his being at the harbour. "Look," he instructs me, hinting at the officers in charge of customs and border control, "none of these people carry anything to protect themselves." It is his job to protect people, he clarifies. When we leave the office, the officer remarks that he likes his job even better now that he knows he is protecting me. I give him an awkward smile and walk back onto the pier.

Five minutes later, things turn ugly. I am standing on the dock amongst the men who joke, drink beer, and carry boxes with gro-

ceries from the ferry into pick-up trucks. The police officer takes me aside, away from the hustle at the ferry. He raises his voice, eyes bulging, hands on his gun belt. "I will show you why I am here!" His words imply a threat. I feel isolated and nervous. The officer points to the beer bottle in my hand and roars that I am not allowed to drink on the pier. In fact, I am not even allowed to be inside the gates of the harbour. "Out!", he yells close to my face while he points to the harbour gates.

I am startled by his change in attitude and uncertain about what I have done to invite his anger. Should I have responded differently to his flirtatious remark? Was my attitude towards him not respectful enough? I refuse to leave and tell him that I have permission from the harbour master to be on the dock, but the officer is not convinced. With long, angry strides he walks over to the man in charge and asks him to remove me. The harbour master does not recognise the seriousness of this request and laughs. He turns around to face me and, with a big grin on his face and a dramatic sweep of his arm, says: "You're fired!"

Two weeks after my unsuccessful expulsion the same police officer appears at the harbour about ten minutes following my arrival; somebody has informed him of my presence. He purposefully walks up to me and says, in a calm and formal tone: "Nikki Mulder? Come with me please." He directs me outside of the gates and apologizes for his previous behaviour, but reinforces the ban. "Nobody knows what you are actually doing here; you have no badge, you have nothing," he says. "From now on you are banned from the harbour." This time, the isolation and banishment seeps into my body. I start to tremble. I feel alone and utterly powerless.

### **Who is in control?**

As often happens with troubling fieldwork encounters, this incident and its aftermath provided valuable insights in the long run. It became apparent to me that to many of my research participants at some point during my fieldwork my presence signalled an almost uncanny presence of the metropolitan state. Some people were convinced that I was an "inspector from Holland" and that I was, like the state, potentially powerful and ever present – someone to be feared and to be kept at a distance. On the other hand, being at the receiving end of a state agent's wrath, I experienced the spectre of the state through its constant proximity, unavoidable on Saba's

five square miles. Feelings of anxiety remained with me for days, reinforced by unexpected encounters with the police officer in the supermarket or on the street. It felt like I was unable to live outside of the reach of a hostile state agent.

However valuable, my awkward encounter with the police officer also confronted me with some uncomfortable dynamics of a more methodological nature. Fieldwork is never without its obstacles, but during this study the special security status of my prime field site and the hierarchical organisation of state bureaucracy complicated processes of basic access, efforts to build rapport, and eliciting informed consent.

The Island Governor eventually restored my access to the harbour premises 'from above.' This time, the permission came in a written rather than verbal form and seemed to carry more weight. But what was the moral value of his approval? The civil servants in the harbour had very little to say about me occupying their semi-public working space. Some apparently did not approve of me being around and took pains to avoid me. The situation reminded me of Brenda Chalfin's reflections on her fieldwork with Ghana's Customs Service. She writes that "in the steep hierarchy of Ghana's Customs administration, what I took to be a simple letter of permission to conduct research was as much a legal order from the commissioner to his underlings to cooperate with me" (Chalfin 2010, 17). In such an institutional setting, do people actually have the freedom to avoid being researched? How do you provide enough clarity and a safe space for people to make clear that they do not wish to be included in your research?

This uncomfortable fieldwork situation certainly deviated from standard descriptions of access and rapport in methodology textbooks. These typically rely on a very linear presentation of the ethnographic process in which trust and rapport will develop quite naturally – although not effortlessly – over time (see DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, 40; O'Reilly 2012, 93). Ambiguities of authority profoundly shaped and continuously altered my relationships and my position in the field. Moreover, the peculiar power (im)balance that characterised the relationships with my research participants made it almost impossible to conduct interviews. Uniformed civil servants were extremely uncomfortable with the idea of being interviewed in a more formal fashion than our daily conversations. Whatever degree of trust we developed, most officers did not allow me to

forget that they were in control. They would ask me about my residency status, write down my personal data for unknown purposes, or, in the most extreme case, ban me from the premises. And yet, meaningful relations did develop. With some of the officers, I could take on a sort of apprentice role and was invited to see things from their perspective. However, continuously swaying back and forth between being a researcher and being policed took an emotional toll and it became increasingly more difficult to take care of my personal well-being.

Back in the relatively safe environment of the university classroom to write my Master's thesis, I returned to my notes about the confrontation with the police officer. Reading my diary was painful and I only realized then how much of an impact it had made on me. Despite many doubts, in the final phase of writing my thesis I did include the vignette above. It functioned, amongst other descriptions, to explore the emotive and affective dimensions of state power. My aim was to challenge a widespread assumption within the scholarly paradigm on the non-sovereign Dutch Caribbean; that its people do not relate affectively to the (Dutch) state. Immersive fieldwork taught me that this assumption is nonsense – I had observed fear, reverence, hope, and pride. Writing about my unsettling fieldwork encounter thus served both an academic purpose and an emotional one. No doubt, writing was therapeutic. It restored a sense of control that I had lost completely during the moment itself, thereby blurring the borders between my personal and my professional life as an ethnographer (Goslinga and Frank 2007, xi). But was its inclusion in my thesis and its repetition on these pages ethical? What is the value of informed consent after such a breakdown of trust? Are my written words harmful to the people involved?

### **Concluding remarks**

As I mentioned earlier, I do not have the answers to these questions. What these fieldwork experiences have made clear to me is that the power balance in fieldwork relationships is not necessarily tilted towards the ethnographer. This does not relieve us from ethical concerns, but it does put standard methodological teachings in a critical light. When we accept that an anthropology concerned with power cannot only engage with those affected by power, but also with those who exercise power, then we need to revisit methodological truisms. Even though I often found it hard to tell which way exactly was up, studying up various chains of command intensified

the insecurities and anxieties intrinsic to fieldwork. Doing research amongst those who exercise power oftentimes stripped me from any sense of control; guidelines to fieldwork seemed to fail.

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